

A költészet születése: A magyarországi költészet társadalomtörténete a 19. század első évtizedeiben [The birth of poetry: A social history of poetry in Hungary in the first decades of the nineteenth century]. By Gábor Vaderna. Budapest: Universitas, 2017. 656 pp.

Gábor Vaderna's new book represents a significant contribution to both nineteenth-century literary and social historical studies. It takes as its primary aim the reading of the neglected corpus of poetry in Hungary from 1800 to 1820. Following the author's classification, this corpus consists of a discussion of poetry written for ceremonial (representational) functions on or for various occasions important to members of the upper classes; popular and bardic poetry, and finally, the poetry of sensibility. Later reactions against this immense number of texts and nineteenth-century literary canon formation produced a state of cultural amnesia which Vaderna's book engages to correct. It will certainly provoke discussion among anyone interested in the decades of poetry it considers.

As far as Hungarian literary history writing is concerned, much of this enormous corpus of texts has been rather ignored so far, and not much scholarly work has been devoted to this kind of writing. This neglect has caused a serious deficit in our ability to read and examine the poetry of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Consequently, our understanding of modern poetry in Hungary has also suffered. Vaderna's book offers a convincing explanation of the genesis of this indifference, as well. Ferenc Toldy, considered the "father of Hungarian literary history writing," established a long tradition of an extremely narrow literary canon in his handbooks published in the mid-nineteenth century. Though Toldy had a good knowledge of the poetry investigated in Vaderna's book, he eventually disqualified most of these texts based on criteria such as language, aesthetic value, and characteristics associated with the concept of the "genius." Due to his particular approach to literary history, he decided to omit non-Hungarian texts, occasional poems, and traditional forms of poetry. No wonder that the ensuing literary history writing, strongly influenced by Toldy's handbooks, again ignored the vast amount of manuscripts and printed material written in the first decades of the nineteenth century. As a result, literary canon formation not only erased a large corpus of vital and important poetry, it also obscured the conventions that supported such writing. This impressive monograph is therefore an attempt to recover an almost lost world.

As stated in the introduction, Vaderna seeks to explore the poetry of the first decades of the nineteenth century in its originating social historical contexts. In other words, Vaderna is not only interested in texts but also in the social milieu in which the cultural practice of literature emerged. Thus, combining the methodological practices of ingenious text interpretation, social historical analysis, and the history of ideas, the monograph eventually reads as an alternative story of modernization within the Habsburg Empire and East Central Europe.

The book is prefaced by a brief history of research and some major considerations regarding its structure. Following the preface, two long introductory chapters reflect on the position of the lyrical poetry of the first two decades of the nineteenth century within the narratives of Hungarian literary histories. Moreover, the introduction provides a detailed overview of the poetic tradition of the eighteenth century, indispensable to an understanding of the poetry of the first decades of the 1800s. According to Vaderna, the five chapters that follow the introduction establish the structure of a previously unknown poetical system.

Chapter 1 considers works of poetry associated with public representations of the upper classes. The authors of this kind of poetry were usually literate people, secretaries and tutors, living in the employment of the nobility. The literature they wrote followed fixed verse forms taught in the schools of law and theology they had attended. Furthermore, the poetry of patronage they practiced was intimately linked to rites of passage of their patrons' lives: births, weddings, inaugural ceremonies, and funerals. This chapter also deals with poems written by aristocrats themselves. Chapter 2 examines another consistent corpus of texts generally regarded in Hungarian literary history as popular poetry. This kind of poetry is basically a hybrid literature of both popular and folkloric forms, a large corpus located at the crossroads of elite and popular culture, and respectively orality, scribal culture, and print publicity. Chapter 3 investigates the writing practices of clergymen authors and focuses on the ways in which ecclesiastical practices intertwined with secular poetry. Chapter 4 explores the poetics of sensibility targeting the lyrical cycle, a genre of considerable importance in Hungarian literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Finally, Chapter 5 ponders the possibilities of bardic poetry in the oeuvre of Dániel Berzsenyi, a major representative of neoclassical poetry in Hungarian literary history.

In general, Vaderna's monograph addresses a broad variety of texts structured around lively case studies to illustrate points in the argument. The

title, ambitious as it is, refers in fact to the birth of modern poetry: poetry written for publication by an individual author expressing individual experiences and common group identities. The corpus of texts examined in VADERNA's book is relevant because it unfolds an intricate story of the birth of modern poetry, and it uncovers the various traditions from which this poetry emerged. From a socio-historical perspective, the monograph also accentuates the importance of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century educational institutions and an educational system that deliberately nurtured poetry writing. Therefore, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the story of the evolution of modern poetry becomes the story of a process of deinstitutionalization, as well. For while the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century educational system provided young people (mainly young men) with the necessary knowledge and skills to become poets or to write poems occasionally if needed, this process gradually became an autodidactic one in the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The monograph, however, does not aim to offer teleological explanations: it exhibits traditions and practices of poetry which can only be understood in their own sociohistorical and cultural contexts.

Clearly, the problem that most concerns VADERNA is not a change in the Hungarian literary canon, it is the tendency to approach literature in all its forms (canonical or non-canonical) in rational, scientific terms. His study therefore is an ambitious and consistent effort to reevaluate the Hungarian cultural and literary heritage. Serious in its argumentation but often humorous in style, the monograph is a most relevant contribution to our understanding of larger processes between literature and society during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Zsuzsa Török
Hungarian Academy of Sciences